

Material visions: dress and textiles

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[insert Plate 1]

How far can dress and textiles, and anthropological images and texts concerned with them, be said to constitute a visual anthropology? And to what extent do ethnographic photographs and film deal with clothing, fabric and their production and consumption?

This chapter explores these and other questions, in the process assessing both the relationship between clothing, textiles and other visual media, and the limitations of the visual lens in this context. Inevitably the chapter is not comprehensive, not least because much of the writing around dress and textiles does not actually deal with the visual and other sensory dimensions of those material objects and is thus excluded here. Additionally, I do not cover areas such as the growing literature on second-hand clothing and recycling,² factory-produced cloth and garments,³ or the social analysis of aspects of the textile production process such as the religious strictures and prohibitions placed upon it in some parts of the world and at some periods in history.^{4,5}

Terminology and scope

Dress and textiles are often distinguished and treated differently – or at least separately – from each other, in anthropological, art historical and connoisseurship writing alike. This separation may at least in part be traceable to the two distinct genealogies, originating in social science and in museums respectively, of different material culture studies (c.f. Miller 2005). Yet, while many textiles do not end up being worn as clothing (e.g. carpets, bedding, storage bags), for many others this is precisely their purpose. In those cases, the dress literature in particular often neglects (and even sometimes explicitly rejects – e.g. Fine & Leopold 1993, cited in Taylor 2002) the significance of the detail and technology of textile (and garment) design, content, composition and production. Yet choices about colour and pattern in particular social and personal settings, and the use of particular fibres and of certain weaving, embroidery and other techniques, may reveal as much if not more than do the cut and context of a garment and the way in which fabric is draped around the human form (Plates 2 and 3). Indeed, the potential of textiles is often exploited by clothing designers and producers, be it, for example, in the use of dense continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterning with heavy, coloured dog's or goat's hair fibres in Jinghpaw Kachin women's tunics to produce not only decoration but also warmth,⁶ or in eighteenth-century Lyonnais use of plaited, flat, stamped and coiled gold and silver yarns to produce differing shimmering effects in the Court costumes for which the cloth was eventually destined (Taylor 2002: 24-25).

¹ I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, and Ilaria Benzoni, with some of the research for this chapter.

² E.g. Hansen 2000a & 2000b, Hansen 2003, Norris 2005, various in Palmer & Clark 2004.

³ E.g. O'Connor 2005.

⁴ See, for example, Adams 1973, Kent 1983, Messick 1987, Polakoff 1982, Schneider 1988.

⁵ Other recent and useful reviews of the anthropology of dress which have been particularly helpful in research for this chapter and which range more broadly than the current visual remit, include Eicher 2000, Hansen 2004 and Chapter 7 ('Ethnographical approaches') in Taylor 2002.

⁶ See Maddigan 2003 for an outline of Kachin textiles.

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The relationship between fibre, technique, visual and physical effects on the one hand, and aesthetic and socio-cultural purpose on the other, is hardly surprising for those familiar with the literature in some areas of dress and textile studies – some of the literature on Indonesian cloths, for example, while it may have largely ignored the mundane, everyday use of cloth (Allerton 2007) has nonetheless long examined fabrics in intricate yet deeply socially contextualised detail (e.g. Barnes 1989 & 1995, Hoskins 1989).⁷ Elsewhere, however, close attention to the material of and techniques by which dress is made – and indeed the way in which it wraps the body that wears it – has often been slight in comparison to the analysis of when and why clothes are worn. Exceptions exist, of course: Tauzin, for example, writing on the female body and its raiments in Mauritania, identifies the importance of palette, density and content (specifically, synthetic versus natural fibres) of fabric used (2007). Nonetheless, discussion of such factors within the wider anthropology of dress is still relatively slight. At the same time (and again some of the work on Indonesian textiles is a notable exception), coverage of textiles can be disappointingly limited in its exploration of the social contexts and uses of fabric. It is thus a premise of this chapter that, especially in any approach claiming a visual analytical focus, explorations of textiles and of dress belong together.⁸

With one or two exceptions, I do not consider here textiles not used in/as clothing; equally I do not discuss dress items not comprised of fabric. Textiles *per se* are covered in less detail here than is dress as a whole – this reflects the balance in that extant literature which can in some way be termed both visual and anthropological (see Schneider 1987 for an extensive review of the anthropology of textiles more broadly). Nonetheless, parts of this chapter do address fundamental elements of textiles and their production, and later I incorporate those elements into my arguments about appropriate approaches to dress and cloth within visual and wider sensory anthropology.

Dress is defined by Eicher & Roach-Higgins as an ‘assemblage of body modifications and supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings’ (1992: 15). This is a definition which according to Hansen (although she does not quote the definition fully), ‘reckons both with the strategic effects entailed in the material properties of dress and their expressive abilities’ (2004: 371). In a later Eicher phrase, this expressive, indeed communicative, aspect of dress is even more evident – it becomes, in fact, what dress is: ‘a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time’ (1995b: 1). In perhaps the majority of extant literature on cloth and clothing, the main focus of enquiry is the communicative (and often the semiotic and ‘symbolic’ – e.g. Bridgwood 1995, Calefato 2004, Hamilton & Hamilton 1989, Kaiser 1989, Sharma 1978, Wariboko 2002 and, on Western fashion, Barthes 1972 & 2006, Hebdige 1979).

There are other important approaches to the subject too of course, including exploration of the consumption and exchange of textiles and garments and the part such transactions play in forming and reinforcing social relations (e.g. Brydon & Niessen 1998, Norris 2004). These transactions may take on particular significance during certain rites of passage (e.g. Bloch 1971, Darish 1989, Feely-Harnik 1989, Gittinger 1979, Kahlenberg 1979, Kendall 1985,

⁷ Note, however, that much other literature in the same area has decontextualised and effectively dehumanised Indonesian cloth, as Niessen argues (1993).

⁸ Trying to bring the two together, is also a principle intention of Küchler & Miller’s edited volume (Miller 2005: 1).

Schneider 1980, Weiner 1976). Additionally, in certain cultures textiles have themselves become a currency of economic exchange (see for example Dorward 1976, Douglas 1967; both cited in Schneider 1987). Furthermore, much can often be gleaned from an examination of the characteristics and consumption of cloth from elsewhere that has come in by trade or other means (e.g. Barnes 1997, Maxwell 1990, Steiner 1985, Were 2005). Schneider – who cannot be accused of neglecting textile composition and design – also identifies a link between textile production and consumption and ‘the mobilization of power by ... units of social action such as classes, dynasties, cities, religious institutions, and ethnic and gender sodalities’, a link she argues ‘is suggested by the relationship of stylistic change to political and economic shifts’ (1987: 409; see also Schneider & Weiner 1986) and exemplified in various ethnographies and histories she cites (e.g. Murra 1962, Weiner 1985; for more recent work on links between usage and socio-economic shifts, see Edwards 2005). In keeping with the main thrust in extant literature, then, communication, exchange and consumption – in various forms – theme much of this chapter although, as we shall see, without augmentation these perspectives are all potentially limiting.

Textiles and dress are not always thought of as constituting a core part of visual anthropology – not only are they absent as a main topic from previous reviews of visual anthropology (e.g. Banks & Morphy 1997), but most authors who actually pay attention to the appearance and composition of cloth and clothing as part of a wider anthropological analysis would characterise their approach as material, rather than visual, anthropology (c.f. the chapters in Küchler & Miller 2005, for example). Yet clearly part of the intention in the production and wearing of fabric is to make a visual impact – and as such, any attempt to understand the cultural value and meanings of textiles and dress needs to utilise at least some visual approaches (c.f. Waterson, this volume, on the built environment).

Visual anthropology has a fundamental ‘duality of focus’ on (i) ‘the use of visual material in anthropological research’ and (ii) ‘the study of visual systems and visible culture’ (Morphy & Banks 1997: 1). This duality structures the earlier parts of this chapter, so that I first discuss cloth and clothing *in* visual media (in the process reviewing the shifting significance of dress and textiles, and problematising the notion of ‘salvage’), and then turn to consider them *as* visual media in their own right (a discussion that encompasses issues of identity, consumption and the temporality of dress and textiles). As we shall, however, neither perspective as it has generally been pursued permits us to explore fully the conceptual and ethnographic complexities of dress and textiles, including in their relationship to the human body. Such relationships – and the part they play in multi-sensory human experience – are intrinsic not only to how clothing is worn, how the body shapes it and notions of dress as a ‘social skin’ (c.f. Turner 1980), but also to how clothing is perceived. Awareness of the importance of corporeality and of the senses, and cultivation of a more phenomenological approach, is current within as well as beyond visual anthropology (e.g. MacDougall 2005, Pink 2005), and it is to such issues in relation to cloth and clothing that the latter parts of this chapter turn.

Of course, other strands have been identified within visual anthropology too. Pink, for example, adds the ‘activist or applied strand’ (this volume; see also 2005, 2007).⁹ I do not deal significantly with this here, but it is an area in which dress may play an important role. Indeed, while it may not be quite the ‘activism’ Pink has in mind, some early ethnographic photographs can be described as having an activist component. An photograph in the collections of Denison University Art Gallery (Ohio), taken by an American missionary and depicting two traditionally dressed Kayah women, and the hand-written scrawl on the back explaining that after the photograph was taken the women converted to Christianity, changed

⁹ Pink also adds another, pedagogical strand (this volume), but this is not of central concern here.

their style of clothing and ‘became clean’, is a case in point. While this may be neither contemporary nor the kind of activism in which ‘anthropologists, local people and activists’ may develop ‘new forms of collaboration’ (Pink, this volume), such images and the interpretive frameworks within which they were placed were important in illustrating and reinforcing a process of deliberately seeking to bring about socio-cultural change. A similar example involving early nineteenth century missionising in Bechuanaland, in which, again, bringing about the local wearing of more Western-style and/or body-encompassing clothes was seen as literally and symbolically bringing about changes in both hygiene practice and moral view, is described by Comaroff & Comaroff (1997; see also Colchester 2005 on Fiji, and Dudley 1999 on Karenni refugees). Indeed, the activist strand in visual anthropology is perhaps but an extension of wider cultural practice – and one which is arguably more focused on the body and by extension the cloths which clothe it, than on any other single, material form. The body as primary subject of – or vehicle for – the disciplining and transforming functions of colonialism, for example, is now well understood (e.g. Anderson 2004, Mills & Sen 2004, Pierce & Rao 2006) and dress has clearly been an important factor within this, though there is not space to discuss it further here (see for example Cohn 1989, and Comaroff & Comaroff 1992 cited in Reischer & Koo 2004: 298).

Dress and textiles in visual media

An obvious relationship between one aspect of visual anthropology and dress/textiles, is the use of visual media such as photographs and film to document and analyse clothing, fabric and associated objects and processes relevant to textile production, consumption and use. This documentation and analysis may be direct or indirect – i.e. it may be the (or one of the) main purpose(s) of the visual record (Plates 4, 5, 6 and 7), or an incidental product of the imaging of something else. Ethnographic photographs of whatever period may prove useful testament to style of cloth, clothing and modes of wearing, whether or not that was one of the photographer’s intentions. The photographs taken of Lan Na royal families in the 1880s and 1890s in what is now northern Thailand, by missionary Samuel Peoples, for example, constitute important historical evidence of dress practices at that time (Conway 2000, cited in Taylor 2002: 152). Equally, the 1930s photographs of dancers in Bali taken by Beryl de Zoete, and the correlative film made by Walter Spies (both film and photographs now residing in the archives of the Horniman Museum), provide an invaluable record of how masks and dress items were worn and used (Hitchcock & Norris 1995, cited in Taylor 2002: 153).

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Barnes has argued that well before the twentieth century approached, the new, ‘scientific’ methods encouraged by the Royal Anthropological Institute’s *Notes and Queries* handbook from 1874 onwards, focused on abstract categories of culture that detracted from a deeper understanding of cloth and clothing (1992: 29-30). This should not be taken as implying that cloth and clothing were absent from or unimportant in early ethnographies, however. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnographies and their associated visual material, the textual and visual description of dress, like that of body decoration, was of great importance as evidence of the perceived characteristics of the people in question – indeed, the essentialising of identity, and the demonstration of the supposed exotic and bizarre, often hinged upon apparently emblematic styles of dress and ornamentation. In Burma, for example, with its very high degree of ethnic plurality, the use of visual description was a key

part of the process of categorising and separating out all the groups concerned (e.g. Carey & Tuck 1896, Colquhoun 1885, Enriquez 1923, Lowis 1906, MacMahon 1876, Marshall 1922, Mason 1868; for more on clothing and the categorisation of identities in colonial Burma, see Dudley 2003a).¹⁰ The bewildering array of human diversity encountered by colonial officers, missionaries and travellers in Burma and many other parts of the world, and its intersection with wider ‘scientific’ imperatives to classify and record, was largely based on and reduced to perceived ethnic distinctions. In turn, focus on ethnicity was often reliant on the recording of two of its apparently most obvious markers, language and dress. Of those two, and as a visual medium in itself, dress was by far the easier to represent in the published, archival and museum domains – and as a subject of both visual media and textual analyses it became simultaneously a *de rigueur* component of ethnographies and a focus of significant attention in its own right (e.g. Emmons 1907, Linton 1933, O’Neale 1945, Roth 1934; see also critical discussions in Scott 1911 and Trevor-Roper 1983). In the process, of course, dress and textiles also became an important component in growing ethnographic museum collections ‘as visual evidence of the existence of exotic, mysterious peoples’ (Taylor 2004: 67).

Clothing, textiles and their production and use are thus documented – whether or not as primary subject – in countless archive and private collections of photographs. Sometimes such photographic recording specifically augments the documentation of a collection of actual textile objects – either historical or made simultaneously by the photographer. James Henry Green, for example, a British recruitment officer in the Burma Rifles in the 1920s, made an impressive collection of textile clothing items from Burma’s Kachin State at the same time as embarking on an extensive programme of photographing the diverse people of the region. The photographs (now, as with most of the clothing items, in the collections of the Green Centre for Non-Western Art at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery in the UK),¹¹ do include some ‘scientific’ typologising images (Odo 2000; c.f. Edwards 1990), but are largely romantic and naturalistic in pose and setting. They are well documented with text that often names individuals and indicates strong ties of affection between photographer and photographed, and include images of specific clothing items collected by Green. Of course, Green and other photographers were not above manipulating their subjects, including providing suitably ‘traditional’ clothing for them to wear. Willmott, for example, recounts the photographing by John Hillyer of a Paiute woman in 1870s north America, ‘wearing a White River Ute dress that [John Wesley] Powell had brought into the field from the Smithsonian collections. The accession label is visible in the photograph on the bodice of the dress’ (2005: 321, citing Fleming & Luskey 1986).

As the twentieth century was well underway, however, and anthropology’s interests and dominant paradigms shifted, dress and textiles became far less important as a subject of study themselves – and thus far less likely to be a primary focus of anthropological visual media. This decrease in focus was compounded by the declining use of photographs generally in published ethnographies (c.f. MacDougall 1997: 290). As part of wider moves away from studying material culture, the main theoretical frameworks governing mainstream anthropological research from the 1930s onwards meant that clothing in particular was reduced to no more than, as Hansen puts it, ‘an accessory in symbolic, structural, or semiotic explanations’, with the result that ‘any serious engagement with clothing itself ... almost

¹⁰ Note that although early ethnographic descriptions placed significant emphasis on dress and its apparent associations with group identities, they did not *solely* describe clothing. Many museum publications, on the other hand, confined themselves entirely to visual and technical description of the cloth and garments of different ethnic groups (e.g. Hansen 1960, Innes 1957, Start 1917).

¹¹ The University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum also holds objects field collected by Green. Green’s photograph collection is explored and illustrated in Dell 2000, and the textile collection in Dell & Dudley 2003.

vanished' (2004: 370; see also Keane 2005). Indeed, by the 1970s Schwarz went so far as to say '[d]escriptions of clothing are so rare in some texts of social anthropology ... that the casual reader might easily conclude the natives go naked' (1979: 23, quoted in Taylor 2002: 195).

Things have changed again in the last twenty or so years, however. One can hardly agree with Taylor's claim that 'assessment of the cultural meanings of textiles clothing and body decoration' is now 'central within this [anthropological] discourse today' (2002: 193), but there is certainly a degree of return to ostensibly nineteenth century interests in material culture, including dress. Today, the focus is of course on the part played by objects in processual, dynamic social life rather than as essential markers of cultural fixity, and, in recent material culture studies, there has been a shift away from exploring social structure and towards social practice and social agency.¹²

Indeed, this contemporary focus – and the associated discomfort with tying dress to any cultural essence – means that within anthropological visual media dress and textiles are still considerably less likely than they once were to be the primary object which the image seeks to describe. There are, of course, exceptions: photographs used in books such as Ahmed's richly detailed monograph of weaving among the nomadic pastoralists in Ladakh (2002), or Dell & Dudley's edited volume on historical and contemporary textiles and dress from Burma (2003), are wholly concerned with the textile items and their contexts. Nonetheless, texts such as these are, while anthropological, still specialist in their focus on textiles and dress – hence it is hardly surprising that cloth and clothing should be a principal subject of the images they contain (although these and other volumes still rarely if ever discuss how photographs were taken and how they fit within wider research methodologies, as Taylor [2002: 158] points out). Outside this specialist area, in anthropology more broadly it remains the case that dress and textiles are less likely than in the relatively distant past to be the main subject of images, except by default.

One visual vehicle for dress and textiles is museum displays. In ethnographic settings in particular the mode of display varies from the simple use of poles for hanging folded cloths and for inserting through arms of upper garments (c.f. the clothing displays on the ground floor of the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum), through padded but faceless mannequins, to life-like waxen-faced figures (Taylor 2002: 41). However, factors such as composition, weight and the decorative exploitation of the play of light on moving fabric, and the way in which clothing fits and moves with the body, are notoriously difficult to convey in the traditionally static and dimly lit display case. Taylor's example of Japanese Noh theatre, and the inability of a fixed display of its costumes to indicate the dramatically important stiffness imposed on the actors' bodies and movement by the multiple, restrictive layers of silk of which the clothes are made, is pertinent here (2002: 26).¹³

Some anthropological visual media depict dress or textiles in films and texts dealing with particular themes such as cloth and clothing as indicators of social and cultural change. The changes in tastes in, and appearance and uses of, clothing over time, are frequently documented in ethnographic descriptions of wider shifts in the social status of women or other

¹² While it is not a primary topic for discussion here, it is interesting to note that in anthropology as in art history, social history and beyond, the majority of contemporary writing on dress and textiles is still produced by women. See Taylor 2002, and the references she cites – Gaines 1990, Vickery 1998, Wilson 1985 – on feminist critique of the gendered nature of both scholarship and its subjects in this area.

¹³ Taylor's book includes a full chapter on problems in displaying dress. One way in which museums may seek to augment the visual – if not other sensory – limitations of static display, of course, is through the accompanying use of additional visual forms, including video and photographic stills.

groups (Eicher 1997, Jirousek 1996, Joshi 1992, Lowe & Lowe 1982, Michelman & Eicher 1995, Park *et al* 1993, Renne 1995, Tauzin 2007). Another theme may be the discussion of clothing, fabric – and persons – as commodities: in Howes's film *Kafi's Story* (2001), for example, Kafi's quest to earn more money so as to be able to buy his prospective second wife the necessary dress turns not only the dress but also himself into a commodity ripe for exploitation in a burgeoning cash economy (Loizos 2007). Globalisation and the mass production that is part of it, clearly has significant implications for textile and clothing production in many areas, effecting not only changes in how things are made and what people wear but also a shift in – or loss of – more local systems of production in which stages of manufacture (such as weaving, printing and dyeing) are integrated with each other within, and given meaning by, wider patterns of symbolic and cultural exchange. I do not discuss this further here, but see, for example, Rabine's semiotic analysis of African fashion in west and east Africa and California (2002).

The processes of textile and clothing production, consumption and wearing, may also be a primary focus of anthropological visual media, as they are in Tiragallo & Da Re's exploration of traditional weaving in Sardinia (1999), for example. Moreover, within the activist strand in visual anthropology it has been argued that filmic representation in a developing world context of women's involvement in such work as traditional textile production, can make a convincing case for the importance of such activity to women's status, confidence and future expectations (Wickett 2007: 128). Film of textile production may also provide a vehicle for the visual examination of a highly (though clearly not solely) visual skill, as Tiragallo explores (2007). Indeed, he purposefully highlights analogies between his own mode of looking as skilled film-maker and the similarly intentional and expert ways of seeing of the weaver, exploring the interaction between the two. He refers to these skilled ways of seeing as 'gaze', by which, as Hughes-Freeland *et al* point out, he means an embodied, purposeful way of looking similar to Grasseni's notion of 'skilled vision' (2007; see also Grasseni 2007 and this volume).

It is interesting to reflect on the extent to which the visual depiction of dress and textiles can be characterised as 'salvage ethnography'. For James Henry Green (see above) as for many other anthropological photographers and collectors of his and slightly earlier eras, for example, it is easy to fit both his collecting and his photography (and his later Cambridge dissertation on the same peoples, Green 1934) within such a paradigm, seeing them as primarily driven by an imperative to record ways of life before they disappeared (c.f. Odo 2000). Salvage ethnography is an approach which tends to be characterised negatively in post-modern anthropological writing, though rarely with an explanation of why. Certainly, one can see the tensions inherent in salvage ethnography done by the very colonial officers and missionaries whose presence and activities were bringing about such rapid social change in the communities their photographs and texts described. Yet visual 'salvage', the retention for posterity of something that is perceived to be disappearing or which may, in fact, have already gone, is arguably an underlying motif in many rather more contemporary collections and visual documentation of dress and textiles, too (visual salvage is also a clear theme in less academic, 'coffee-table' volumes such as Diran 1997). There is an irony here, of course, in that despite the emphasis on social change in some contemporary studies, in many other works on textiles in particular (especially those aimed at more popular markets), the cloths and the people who produce and wear them are treated as somehow frozen in time, untouched by a changing, globalising world. Notable exceptions, with explicit discussion of contemporary political and economic challenges, include Dell & Dudley 2003, Lewis & Lewis 1984, Niessen 1993.

Textiles and people may still be ‘salvaged’ even without being frozen in time, however. Amongst my own field photographs taken in the Karenni refugee camps in northwest Thailand, there is a subset of images of newly arrived Kayah women whom at the time I was conscious of wanting to photograph because of their particularly traditional form of dress (Plate 8). I did not, when they first arrived in 1996-7, think that as many women as have now abandoned this form of dress would so, but I was aware from the outset that arrival in the heterogeneous refugee camp community, overt pressures from evangelising longer-staying refugees, and the impossibility of continuing to produce in the camps the hand-made textiles of which the clothes were made, would all make the continued wearing of these garments increasingly difficult. The motivations for wanting to photograph the style of dress while one could were complex. In part, I was seeking visually to augment textual discussions of the social tensions (many of which related directly to the female new arrivals’ dress; Dudley 1998 & 1999) and processes of cultural reproduction in a diverse refugee population. I wanted too to produce visual documentation to support my and a local assistance agency’s (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to enable the women to set up weaving projects in order to continue production of their preferred clothing. But undoubtedly I also wished to record a traditional form before it disappeared – I was salvaging, albeit visually rather than materially. But is this necessarily a bad or uncommon thing? It was not just that this was an unusual form of dress I had not encountered before and which was now under evident pressure; in addition, traditional Kayah dress is little documented visually or textually anywhere (and also very rarely encountered in museum collections; c.f. Dudley 2003b for more general outline of Burmese textiles in museums); and, most importantly, the Kayah refugees themselves focused their anxieties about the future and about being able to continue life as they would like, upon the problem of women’s dress – *they* were the main source of a sense that this style of clothing was under imminent and unwanted threat. Nonetheless, at the time I felt as discomfited by photographing – virtually collecting, as it felt to me – these newly arrived women and their dress as I did by my later collecting for two museums of contemporary objects from the longer-staying refugee community. It was a personal discomfort which in the case of my camera I eased by handing it instead to Richard Than Tha, an artistic young student amongst the pre-existing refugee community.

[insert Plate 8]

The point of this detour into an aspect of my own field experiences is not only to problematise and relate to contemporary research some postmodern critiques of ‘salvage ethnography’. It is also to argue that dress and textiles have a particular pertinence in this context. This is so, I suggest, for two main reasons. The first is the visual power of dress and textiles – their functioning as a visual medium in their own right. Certainly, as I shall discuss later other sensory aspects are important in the impacts of cloth and clothing too; however, the first impact, at least on all those other than the wearer herself, is almost invariably visual. The visual is also usually the most powerful attractor to a collector – and salvage, whether through images, material objects or ethnographic data, is essentially collection. The second reason for the especial relevance of dress and textiles to salvage ethnography is the intimate relationship between clothing, the human body and identity – there are echoes here of the old essentialising of ethnicity and other forms of identity in styles of dress, but I am claiming that something far more complex and sensitive in the connection between fabric garments and those who wear them, is also intrinsic to the value placed on dress by the observer. I will return to the links between textiles, dress and the body later, suffice to say here it is precisely these links, together with visual impact, that give cloth and clothing its power, its collectibility and its particular salience, in a salvage context or otherwise.

Dress and textiles as visual media

Dress and textiles are not just the subjects of other visual representations, then; they constitute powerful visual media in their own right and, prefigured by the related topic of body decoration (e.g. Strathern and Strathern 1971), in recent decades have been written about as such. Dress and textiles have especial potency – in social practice and in anthropological and museological representations alike – in signifying and mediating identities of various kinds. The relationship between identity and dress in particular, is a subject much written about (e.g. Barnes & Eicher 1992, Eicher 1995a, Gittinger 1979, Kuper 1973, Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992, Sumberg 1995, Worth & Sibley 1994), including in anthropological analyses of Western contexts (Beward et al. 2002, de Wita 1994). It is a theme I have already touched upon in looking at past, more simplistic approaches to the apparent ability of cloth and clothing to represent an essentialised ethnicity. Now, it is well accepted that ‘identities’, ethnic or otherwise, are not fixed and essential but mutable, constructed, plural and potentially fragmented (c.f. Banks 1996). As such, they are liable to both deliberate and unconscious manipulation and so, by extension, are the visual and material forms used to signify them. Explorations of shifting linkages between ethnic identities and certain textiles or garments in contexts of nationalist constructions of politically expedient pan-identities, for example, include Arthur’s discussion of the Hawai’ian shirt (2006), Dudley’s examination of Karenni national dress (2002), and Seng & Wass’s study of Palestinian wedding dress (1995). Much of the value of dress and textiles in representing identity in such settings lies in the apparently greater local and cultural specificity of ‘traditional’ dress – a factor that is also exploited in both film and art. Papuan artist Wendi Choulai, for example, has created large-scale ‘shadow paintings’ as commentaries ‘on the personality split experienced by contemporary Papua New Guineans residing in the city. The person in the painting is the public figure, while her shadow represents the village person ... the shadow often wears fiber [sic] skirts and headdresses, while the public figure might be dressed in a suit or a dress’ (Lewis-Harris 2004: 282).

The importance of dress to identity, and the manipulation of it so as to represent, and ultimately inculcate, a new sense of identity, then, can be significant in the production of images. One motivation for this may be the political aspirations of the image-maker, or their attempt to resolve tensions between these aspirations and other reasons for the work. Photography of mixed ancestry families in the USA in the early twentieth century, for example, taken by Caroline Bond Day (herself of mixed ancestry) as part of her research work for the Harvard eugenicist Ernest Hooton, ‘collectively provide a visual mediation between Day’s political goals [of African American equality], her exclusive focus on mixed-race families and her use of physical anthropology and blood-quantum language’ (Ardizzone 2006: 106). At the same time as using anthropometric techniques in her still controversial fieldwork, Day utilised clothing’s function as a marker of identity to convey convincingly the respectability and intelligence of her subjects, through both the general associations between fashionable dress (and grooming) and the middle classes, and the ability of clothes to connote individual identity and achievement – and thus demonstrate that political demands for equality were appropriate. ‘A graduate gown’, for example, ‘marked both an individual achievement and a message to white America that excluding Negroes from educational institutions was unjustified’ (2006: 117).

Visual media such as ethnographic film may also frequently utilise culturally constituted relationships between dress, values and identity as a narrative device. *Highway Courtesans* (Brabbee 2005), for example, is a documentary about Bachara women who work as prostitutes serving the transitory community of lorry drivers and others passing along a busy

trunk route in India. In the film's closing scene, its principal character, Guddi, is filmed after the collapse of her relationship with her boyfriend: she wears jeans, clothing to which her now ex-boyfriend had objected, thus demonstrating her newly acquired 'independence embodied in consumption' (Feldman & Morarji 2007: 253).

A principal reason why dress and textiles are often of key significance in visual media and analysis thereof, then, is that dress in particular has a central role in how people everywhere signify, visually and with varying degrees of intention, aspects of themselves. In writing about contemporary wedding photographs in Beijing, for example, Constable emphasises the styles of dress on display in the images (2006). She argues that while the styles of both dress and image superficially suggest similarities with wedding photographs in Taiwan and other parts of contemporary east Asia (c.f. Adrian 2003),¹⁴ rather than seeing them 'as yet another example of ... hegemonic global capitalist homogenization' we should understand their 'specific meanings of consumption, modernity, nostalgia, gender, and romance that are particular to ... post-Mao China' (2006: 40). Indeed, as Hansen argues the wider anthropological 'turn to consumption as a site and process of meaning making is evident also in clothing research' (2004: 369; see also Miller 2005), something which has direct connections too to the notion of fashion. Fashion, as Hansen points out, 'is no longer an exclusive property of the West', with contemporary fashion now being produced – and valued and pursued – in quantity in most areas of the globe (2004: 370; on fashion beyond the West and globally, see for example Hopkins 2005, Khan 1992, Niessen et al. 2003).

Through fashion and otherwise, dress is frequently and deliberately utilised as a visually direct way to incorporate aspects of aesthetic and other values normally imagined as belonging to a different period or people. One reason for doing so may be an attempt to subvert the mainstream values of the present, or at least superficially to represent such subversion as an integral part of a marketable (and profitable) identity, as may be done by pop musicians. A non-Western example of such behaviour is well described by de Kloet, who writes of Chinese rock musicians wearing grey Maoist suits in order to incorporate visual links with 'the communist past into [contemporary Chinese] rock aesthetics' (2005: 242). Not dissimilarly, in Japan young people choose 'cute' styles in order to rebel against what they perceive as the strictures of the uniforms so ubiquitous in their society (McVeigh 2000; c.f. Hethorn & Kaiser 1999 on youth style and cultural anxieties). A different sort of 'mixing' of local and other values, one done as deliberate synthesis rather than as subversion, is witnessed in the Yoruba hand-woven ecclesiastical textiles and the clerical garments made out of them, described by Renne (2000) as expressing African-ness and Roman Catholicism simultaneously. Yet another type of acquisition of the style – or perceived style – of others, happens when one group seeks to fit unnoticed into another: the abandonment of their usual skirt-cloths by displaced Karenni women when they go 'into town' in Thailand, so as not to be marked out as 'Burmese' and as 'refugees', is one example of this (Dudley 2000), as is the adoption of urban dress by rural, Indian villagers in Ecuador working in urban centres (Lentz 1995).

However significant the local specificity of dress in any particular setting, the individual's sense of self and aesthetics also plays a role (c.f. Jackson & O'Neal on older women's sense of their appearance and its relationship to how they dressed [1994]). Nimis's article on the emergence of female studio photographers in southwest Nigeria, for example, notes the importance for the reputation of women photographers not only of making their studios attractive, but of dressing themselves in a skilful and feminine way (2006: 426). Arguably, the ability of dress to communicate aspects of *individual* identity to others perhaps reaches its

¹⁴ For more on Chinese wedding photographs, see also Cheung 2006, Eric 2006, Lozada 2006.

apotheosis in large cosmopolitan centres in which anonymity is both produced and unfettered. Big cities 'allow one to remain a stranger to others in a way that would not be possible in a rural or small town setting. Anonymity further allows for greater creativeness of lifestyle and "presentation of self", in which dress becomes a primary mode of communication to others' (Clapp 2005: 6). Of course, self-expression through dress in *private* settings located within and outside cosmopolitan centres may also be important – c.f. Miller (1997) on fantasy dressing and self-expression in the American Midwest.

For Constable's informants on contemporary Chinese wedding photographs as for many others, the re-creation – and use on certain occasions – of a 'traditional' Chinese style of dress is a link to the past (real or imagined). This apparent temporality of clothing is one reason why its visual qualities take on such significance: in the Chinese example, dress provides '[a visual] example of "nostalgia without memory" [Appadurai 1996: 30], or an attempt to produce an image of a Chinese past and present that seamlessly reconnects pre- and post-Mao China, excising several decades of recent history from memory, in a sense making up for lost time' (Constable 2006: 48). Yet at the same time, the additional production and consumption of wedding photographs in which Western-style bridal clothing is worn 'serves as an expression of global modernity' (*ibid*). Contrasting styles of both clothing and photography are thus used to juxtapose and convey the values and aesthetics of two distinct periods in Chinese history (and sometimes, through the re-touching and re-shooting of individual images, two distinct periods in the lives of the featured couple, too). Similar juxtapositions, uses of multiple forms and indeed reinventions of tradition – including by different groups (such as age-sets) within one community – are documented elsewhere (e.g. Chapman 1995, Dudley 2002, Eicher 1997; Jirousek 1996; Lynch et al. 1995 & 1996, Turner 1954).

Yet in many social contexts, certain forms of cloth and clothing represent not juxtapositions or excisions of certain chronological periods, but visual and material repositories of longitudinal – and often very personal – memory and time. Sampler embroideries in European and North American traditions are an obvious example – and one which often incorporates text that explicitly expresses both the individual maker's identity and the time at which the work was done. Even more complex and personal can be the quilts that are of significance in a number of cultural settings. There is a long tradition of quilting in Europe and, especially, North America – something which is the subject of film (Barret 1976, Bole-Becker & Becker 1997, Ferrero 1980) as well as textual analysis (e.g. Cerny 1992, Forrest & Blincoe 1995, Stalp 2007). Hand-stitched quilts, be they personal and private, or be they part of a public project such as the American AIDS Memorial Quilt (Krouse 1999; <http://www.aidsquilt.org>), have 'lived experiences sewn into' them (Fernandez 1998: 1201). These experiences may incorporate not only those of the maker herself, but may also draw upon an intergenerational store of memory, skill and, often, quite literally the fabric of history: quilts that are made using remnants of old garments, curtains and clothes store, juxtapose and display vestigial pieces of an individual's and a family's past. Quilts are important in eastern Polynesia, too, and Küchler has described the way in which quilts there materially encompass features of women's lives and relationships. Such quilts are made not for display, but for keeping and for giving, and, ultimately, to wrap a woman's body when it goes to its grave (Küchler 2003; see also Küchler 2005). Other kinds of textile also embody uninterrupted, longitudinal time, often across a number of generations. Duggan writes of textiles on the Indonesian island of Savu as 'visual markers of time', for example (2004: 104), and Henare claims that Maori cloaks 'quite literally [provide] continuous threads or pathways between layers of generational time that constitute tangible and substantive links between ancestors and their living descendants' (2005: 125).

With the exception of quilts most of the discussion thus far, particularly that pertaining to dress as visual media, has focused on the ability of cloth and clothing to represent and communicate certain values and ideas through what we might call relatively macro-level visual attributes. Style, colour and cut of garments, for example, are all clearly important in signifying wearers' identities and also in such areas as the use of dress as a narrative device in film. But smaller-scale qualities of textiles themselves, including fibre, motif, technique, the mode of transition between colours, material and design elements, and their juxtaposition in fabric and in the garments made from them, are also important. Thus Perani & Wolff's discussion of clothing and textiles amongst the Yoruba in Nigeria demonstrates the significance of technological and material innovations in the colonial and postcolonial periods – including the incorporation of lurex thread in the 1990s (Perani & Wolff 1999; other work on new fibres includes O'Connor 2005). The 1995 Barbican Art Gallery exhibition, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*, also focused on innovation, change, inter-continental trade and the continual reinvention of the 'traditional' – indeed, in the book that accompanied the exhibition, its curator John Picton claimed that '[t]raditionality was ... exposed as a fiction' (1995: 11).

In relation to the ubiquitous subject of identity, much has been written on the supposed linkages between particular groups and certain textile styles, designs and techniques – indeed, as Schneider points out 'scholars have proposed the existence of deeply rooted indexical codes' (1987: 413), especially in relation to textiles from Indonesia, and Central and South America (e.g. Fox 1977, Gittinger 1979, Schevill 1985, Wasserman & Hill 1981).¹⁵ Such attempts to concretely link design elements with specific identities and meanings can easily stray into a rigid imposition of fixed cultural categories of the kind now understood to be problematic; it is also an approach which attempts to describe, but fails to explain, cultural diversity and reproduction. In addition, with the exception of analyses of fibres and of the weaving and dyeing processes, these sorts of explorations of textiles *per se* are strongly grounded in the *visual* qualities of the fabric as a whole and of the individual design elements it incorporates, as well as in supposed mythological and social origins for such patterns (e.g. Morris 1986). Yet textiles go well beyond the visual, too: colour use in dyed, embroidered or woven patterns, for example, is often elaborately complemented by the textures of different fibres and the tactility wrought by the use of techniques such as various float weaves.¹⁶

The visual body

[insert Plate 9]

If textiles go well beyond the visual at the relatively small-scale level of the fibres, pigments, designs and techniques used to produce them, so too do they demonstrate an extensive sensory range in how they are used. This is perhaps especially so when fabric is used for the purposes of dressing the body. Cloth can hide, disguise and reveal; the way in which it is worn can change how its wearer moves and behaves (see Frembgen 2004); it can be erotic or

¹⁵ The conviction in much – mostly earlier – scholarship that non-Western textile designs invariably had complex symbolic explanations constitutes an extended version of these sorts of analyses. I do not discuss this further in this chapter suffice to say that as Schneider (1987) points out, it is problematic in both its interpretation and in its own arguable claims that the inability of informants to convey such explanations themselves must be due either to reticence or the loss of cultural memory (e.g. Gittinger 1979, Wasserman & Hill 1981; contrast the distinctions between cloth valued for ceremonial purposes and that valued for artistic merit alone, in Fox 1977, and see also writing on the differences between items produced for internal use and those intended for purchase by outsiders (including tourists), such as Graburn 1982, Steiner 1985, Waterbury 1989).

¹⁶ Useful sources on the possible techniques and their effects, are numerous; see for example Gillow & Sentence 1999, Schneider 1987.

asexual; and it can absorb, hide or exude bodily fluids and smells. I will return to extensions beyond the visual below, but first it must be acknowledged that fabric and clothes and their relationship to the body, especially in movement and in how the body's flow affects that of the garments and vice versa, themselves constitute a highly visual phenomenon – at least from the perspective of all observers other than the wearer her/himself. Nonetheless it is as yet a relatively little explored issue in the literature, although some authors do focus on it, sometimes as part of discussions of how clothes are used to make the body appear as if it is of a different shape than it actually is (c.f. Tauzin 2007; more generally on dress and the body, see Entwistle 2000, Entwistle & Wilson 2001, Summers 2001, Warwick & Cavallaro 1998).

One area where the folding of fabric to clothe the body has been more deeply examined is in the case of the sari and other forms of draped cloth (as opposed to cut-and-sewn constructed garments) in India (Tarlo 1996, Banerjee & Miller 2003). In the colonial period, the tension between draped cloth on the one hand or tailored garment on the other, both mirrored and represented political tension – and fundamental to the opposition between the two forms is the very distinct relationship each produces between clothes and body. Deciding what to wear and the very act of wearing constitute, as these authors demonstrate, not only an individual, yet socially, politically and historically constructed performance, but also a continual process of choice. What is more, folded cloth such as the sari demonstrates perhaps more than tailored clothes that clothes and the body are, in most contexts, not fully meaningful without each other. The body gives the sari form and life – and, in a social sense, the reverse is also true. The visual impression made by a dressed body – or a bodily-occupied garment – is, while not the only sensorily significant factor, nonetheless usually the first and most foregrounded way in which clothes and their wearer get noticed.

What is the dressed body noticed *for*? And how much does the body's presence matter in what clothes are deemed to 'say'? We have already discussed linkages between dress and notions of identity – dress as deliberate or accidental communicator about the self and belonging. Guddi's jeans at the end of *Highway Courtesans*, for example (Brabbee 2005; see above), are about both contemporary consumerism and doing what she, not her ex-boyfriend, wishes. Some of this would probably have meaning to Guddi even if no-one saw her wearing the jeans or, indeed, if they remained in a cupboard, but their very visibility is what allows her to make as much of a statement with them, to herself as well as to others, as she does. Furthermore, neither the jeans would not have their full meaning and impact consummated if they remained *unworn*, if they did not contain Guddi's *body*. That this seems such an obvious truism may explain why there is still relatively little literature addressing firstly the myriad and complex relationships between fabric, dress and the body (though see Allerton 2007, Banerjee & Miller 2003, Johnson & Foster 2007), and secondly the importance of cloth and clothing in their own right rather than as simply indicators or communicators of other areas of social experience (a point also made in Colchester 2003). The power of dress (and often textiles too) to communicate identities and values and to stand for itself, without the body within it would most often be muted at best: clothing is social action; *the impact is in the wearing*. As Hansen states:

'In the materialization of value that informs ... decisions about how to dress and where, needs and wants converge as do ephemerality and continuity. This is the space between the desired and the performed where dress practices become involved in constructing both individual identity and visions about the future'

(Hansen 2003: 308).

The draping of fabric around parts of the body is clearly done with different purposes in different contexts. It may be done to accentuate, to modify, or to conceal (see Harvey 2007),

and may be utilised only by specific sex, age or other groups within a particular society. The veil, particularly Islamic forms thereof, is perhaps the example *par excellence* of cloth used to hide some or all of women's faces and bodies. As Hansen points out, by the 1970s scholarship was already qualifying and nuancing 'the connection between veiling and women's subordination' (2004: 382), and it has continued to enhance understandings of the complexity of the veil's shifting functions and meanings ever since. Brenner (1996), for example, argues that wearing the veil in Java has become increasingly associated with women's and society's hopes for the future rather than with notions of the past, and El Guindi (1999) demonstrates the increasing role of the *hijab* in heightened Islamic consciousness in Egypt (1999).¹⁷ Of course, there is a pointed and important paradox in women's wearing of the veil: it seeks to render all or some of their individual physical features and femininity, invisible – yet it is itself a highly visible emblem not only of Islamic identity but also of femininity *per se*. The veil, in other words, makes invisibility very visible – it makes an overt and visual point out of concealment, in the process transforming the private, individual woman into her public representation of generalised womankind. It is in this tension between invisibility and visibility – rooted in both the visual power of the veil and in its intimate (and visually evident) relationship with the body – that all the political, social and religious potentials of the veil and its uses lie. Such a tension and its basis in the visual, is nonetheless hardly unique to the veil – it is applicable to any use of cloth to clothe the human body: cloth that covers the body and is simultaneously intimately connected with and indicative of it.¹⁸

Crucially, then, the relationship between clothing and the body is double-faced: dress not only faces outwards to the world, in ways affected by the shape and movement of the body; it also touches the body. This dual aspect is pointed out by Turner (1980) in his discussion of clothing as 'social skin'. It allows us, as Hansen puts it, 'to explore both the individual and collective identities that the dressed body enables' (2004: 372). Indeed, these identities may often have an uneasy if not downright conflicting relationship, with dress turning into 'a flash point of conflicting values' (*ibid*). Allerton too uses analogies between clothing and integument, drawing upon Anzieu's approach to skin (1989). She refers to Indonesian sarongs as 'super-skins' which are 'artefactual extensions of their wearer's body [that can] absorb substances and intentions, offer comfort at times of upset or illness, and transmit social and emotional messages', and as such have not a specific biography but 'a range of possibilities of becoming' (2007: 22). The interior of a sarong 'acts as a secret container of goods, emotions and body-states' (*ibid*: 37), while the exterior forms part of the visual impression made by the wearer and expresses different messages to those among whom the wearer circulates. Like the visually apparent surfaces of the body about which Schildkrout writes, clothing too becomes an active and multifaceted 'interface between the individual and society' (2004: 319).

Of course, one way in which the usually integral relationship between the body and dress is demonstrated, is by its very subversion. The removal of clothing and subsequent exposure of the body has its place in certain everyday and ritual activities. It is also deliberately used to titillate or shock, often in complex ways which rely fundamentally on the *visual* impact of dress and undress (c.f. Martinez 1995). Undress has also been used in particular ways in ethnographic film, both for the titillation of the viewer and/or for the evocation of certain

¹⁷ For other works touching on aspects of Islamic forms of the veil and other headcoverings, see Abu-Lughod 1990, Ong 1990, Rasmussen 1991, Sandıkı & Ger 2005, Shirazi 2001, White 1999.

¹⁸ One topic identified by Hansen (2004) within this area which I will not explore here but in which there is an expanding literature (e.g. Behrman 1995, Besnier 2002, various in Cohen et al. 1996), is dress and the body in the context of beauty pageants in different parts of the world. As Hansen outlines, beauty pageants involve 'complicated negotiations between local and global norms of beauty, gender and sexuality' (2004: 383, citing Cohen et al. 1996), and as such comprise 'a rich site for dress research on representation, gender construction, performance, and politics' (2004: 383).

dominant interpretive frameworks. Thus Alan Marcus, for example, writes that the removal of clothes by Nanook and the women, prior to settling together under their blanket in *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty 1922), is done not only ‘for our scopophilic pleasure and libidinal desire’ (2006: 213) but also as dramatisation of Freud’s notion of the ‘primal father’ who has rights of sexual access to all women (Freud 1919).

The undressed body, then, has a particular impact. So too does disembodied dress. In representational settings such as museum displays where people themselves are usually absent, clothing’s intimate relationship to the person that wore it makes items of dress a powerful tool. Using cloth and clothing in museum display can enable museums to personalise historical representation, to ‘make space for private dimensions of historic times ... [and] [u]ltimately, [to] conceive of history as the historicity of private space’ (Bruno 2003: 322). Indeed one might add that through clothing, history becomes the historicity not only of private space but also of private and public aspects of the physical body.

Bruno’s article on museums in Havana plays particular attention to the importance of dress in the displays. Clothes, like photographic portraits and shoes (Bruno herself draws the comparison with the shoes displayed in New York’s Holocaust Museum), are intimate in their association with those individuals whom they represent. They are ‘vestiges that metonymically refer to the live body of a departed person ... corporeally speak of them, connect us back to them ... traces left behind by people who died ... matter that allows us to access [the departed’s] lives, and process their death’ (2003: 319). Using clothing in the way the museums in Havana do is indeed ‘an intimate way of telling a history’ (*ibid*: 320). Through clothes we can see – and tactily intuit – traces of particular past lives and events, so that in Havana’s Museum of Revolution, for example, the visible bullet holes and blood stains on some items connect us directly with the experience of those who wore them. Indeed such traces, especially if the garment belonged or is imagined to have belonged to a particularly significant individual, lend further weight to the aura and power that may be attributed to the clothing (e.g. Nelson’s coat [in the UK National Maritime Museum, <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/collections/nelson/>], and the Turin shroud).¹⁹ But as Bruno points out, there can also be

‘a loneliness to clothes. As the body that inhabited them departed, they are left hanging. Emptied out. The sole, sparse melancholic trace of a life ended. A sad testimony to that parting, and to the passing of time’

(2003: 319).

Like the undressed body, the unworn piece of clothing is lifeless and incomplete – very different from the dynamic, continually moving fabric as it is worn in daily life. Indeed, the loneliness and melancholy that can seem to emanate from clothing such as that in museum collections are accompanied by more pragmatic concerns with the difficulty in exhibiting dress appropriately and in conveying something of the animation an item of dress may once have had when worn. To an extent, the same can apply not only to clothes but also to other textile items closely associated with the animated human form, such as soft furnishings, bedding and bags, all of which may appear lifeless and somehow incomplete of form without the rumpling and impressions caused by seated bodies or contained personal objects (Plate 10).

[insert Plate 10]

¹⁹ The power of a garment because of its association with particular individuals can of course be important even without the existence of specific physical traces such as blood and damage (c.f. Weiner 1985).

Beyond the visual

Yet how much of all this is entirely *visual*? Other sensory qualities are of course important too. Much recent work on dress within a material culture tradition is said to focus on the efficacy of ‘materiality as a surface that constitutes social relations and states of being’ (Hansen 2004: 373; see also Johnson & Foster 2007). Work such as that in Küchler & Miller 2005 does, as Hansen summarises, look at material qualities of clothing and how they impact upon people’s use of clothes. This is a perspective in which dress, the body and social performance together constitute ‘dress as embodied practice’ (Hansen 2004: 373), and in which the visual is important but far from alone. Yet the embodiment being referred to in such approaches is but the beginning of a long story – most of which, one feels, has still to be told.

In representations in museums, film, photography and text alike, the extra-visual qualities of dress and fabric are, like the dynamic relationship between body and clothing, difficult to convey. The sense of touch in particular is, theoretically, second only to vision in enabling full perception of textiles and of the three-dimensional, bodily occupied garments that incorporate them – the tactility of fabric and the shape of bodies alike are fully comprehended only when we place our hands upon them. Yet in lived experience as well as in visual and textual representation, such physical touching is often either impossible or forbidden. In daily life, the wearer can stroke the textured metallic brocade decorating her own skirt and a mother can feel the softness of her baby’s woollen shawl, but social boundaries prevent observers having direct tactile access to these characteristics – and of course on film, in a photograph or behind the glass of a display case, no-one has such contact. The smells of a new cotton shirt or an old baby’s cloth too are unavailable to all but those who are privileged with close and full physical access to the garment. Sound, on the other hand, at least when cloth is worn and thus in movement, like vision has public saliency – and indeed often carries notable social meaning and value of its own, as in the literary ‘swish’ of eighteenth and nineteenth century European and north American women’s long skirts and the notion that the greater and clearer the swish the more luxurious and abundant the fabric used.

Does all this mean that at least some non-visual attributes of cloth and clothing, such as the texture of fabric or the three-dimensionality of a garment, are generally available only to the maker and wearer and thus somehow tangential to a wider anthropological view? A phenomenological approach would hold that this is not the case, because all aspects are integral to lived experience. Ultimately, the different sensory aspects are inseparable – c.f. Merleau-Ponty’s claim that a colour is not simply a colour, but the colour *of* something that has physical, material qualities too, with the result that colour has an intrinsic relationship to texture, shape etc. The colour, in other words, is *felt* as well as seen (1962: 365). Thus, because of the habitual interlinkage we make between vision and other senses, we can comprehend – or at least imagine we comprehend – texture and other tactile, multi-dimensional attributes of objects even (as when perusing a museum display that lies behind glass) without actually using our sense of touch.

It is not only other sensory qualities which extend the perception of dress and textiles beyond the visual, either. Cloth can acquire religious or other significance not only through past association with particular persons or events – and perhaps the acquisition of visually evident traces thereof – but also through the means of its production and/or consumption, none of which may be visually or otherwise sensorily apparent at all. That particular taboos were observed during dyeing or weaving of the fibres, for example, lends power to certain textiles – a power which may be known and understood both by those who see and those who more intimately, physically interact with the cloth. Such power may not be seen or physically felt,

yet it can still play an important part in how a cloth is treated, stored and used – and indeed in how it is seen and felt. Individual wellbeing is also relevant here. It is a notion that is integrally related to the physical senses, but is not detectable by and goes beyond them into ‘feeling right’, something which is crucial in the choice of what to wear on a particular day and for a specific event (c.f. Woodward 2005).

Earlier in this chapter I demonstrated that dress and textiles act as visual media in their own right, and I indicated that perhaps the bulk of the literature treats them in this way. Yet there are problems with this common approach, not least of which is that the dominant analytical focus in much literature on the visual as signifier results in dress especially being discussed as ‘representing something else rather than [as] something in its own right’ (Hansen 2004: 369). Dress and textiles are, as we have seen, widely explored as standing for and as communicating identities, values and relationships (often with an emphasis on essentially semiotic modes of interpretation, the objections to which in a wider art context articulated by, for example, Gell [1998: 14 *passim*] I largely share). Yet dress and textiles are still relatively little examined in their own, material, right. Hansen points out that ‘new efforts to reengage materiality suggest this is changing’ (2004: 369), but as yet it remains a small shift.

Decisions made about the clothing one wears and its role in individual daily life and in cultural reproduction alike, are simultaneously and variously produced by and productive of particular, multiply constituted ideas of who one is, must be and would like to be. This power of clothing to signify identities, values and status – the prowess of dress in the processes of subjectivation – appears to be intrinsically visual, relying primarily on the impact of what is seen. Yet, as is now clear, other sensory aspects are important too, not least to the wearer herself. Of course, this renders dress and textiles irrelevant to visual anthropology no more than it might the built environment or the body itself. What is more, it is hardly radical or original now to claim that the visual inevitably extends beyond itself: ‘[v]isual representations systems are part of more general cultural processes. They can affect the unseen and the unseeable ...’ (Banks & Morphy 1997: 23).

What is interesting, is to consider this in the context of the dynamic between object and viewer, dressed person and observer: the assumption of an absolute dichotomy between the two, where the interpretation of an object with fixed physical attributes depends upon the subjectivity of the viewer, is problematic. If perception and understanding lie not in the viewer’s culturally (and otherwise) constituted mind but are continually formed and re-formed somewhere in the space between object and observer, in which both have a degree of agency or influence, then perhaps we can move forward in the study of dress and textiles by approaching them as particular forms of intersubjectivity with an intimate relationship to the human body. As Merleau-Ponty argues, our own bodies are themselves simply another form of material object, an ‘organism of colours, smells, sounds and tactile appearances’ (1962: 275). Our bodies and the physical objects around us, including cloth and clothing, share qualities that determine the nature of our interactions with and perceptions of those other objects. Is this perhaps even more pertinent to bodies and the materials that dress them, than to other kinds of object? Certainly, the phenomenological notion that object-human relationships are reciprocal and dialogical (we see, and are seen; we touch, and are touched) seems especially pointed when considering the relationship between a person and the clothes s/he wears. Phenomenological approaches to dress and to cloth may increasingly take over from the earlier, semiotic analyses which for dress as much as for the body focused on display and on artefactuality (c.f. Joyce 2005). Indeed, we might hope that, to paraphrase Joyce (writing on the body but making claims equally applicable here), such future approaches will replace ‘prior static conceptions’ of dress and textiles as ‘public, legible surface[s]’ (2005:

139). As a result, the importance of the visual will not be lost, but it will be more appropriately partnered by other sensory aspects of our lived experience of clothing and textiles, and by a deeper understanding of the relationships between those aspects, social agency and cultural reproduction.

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